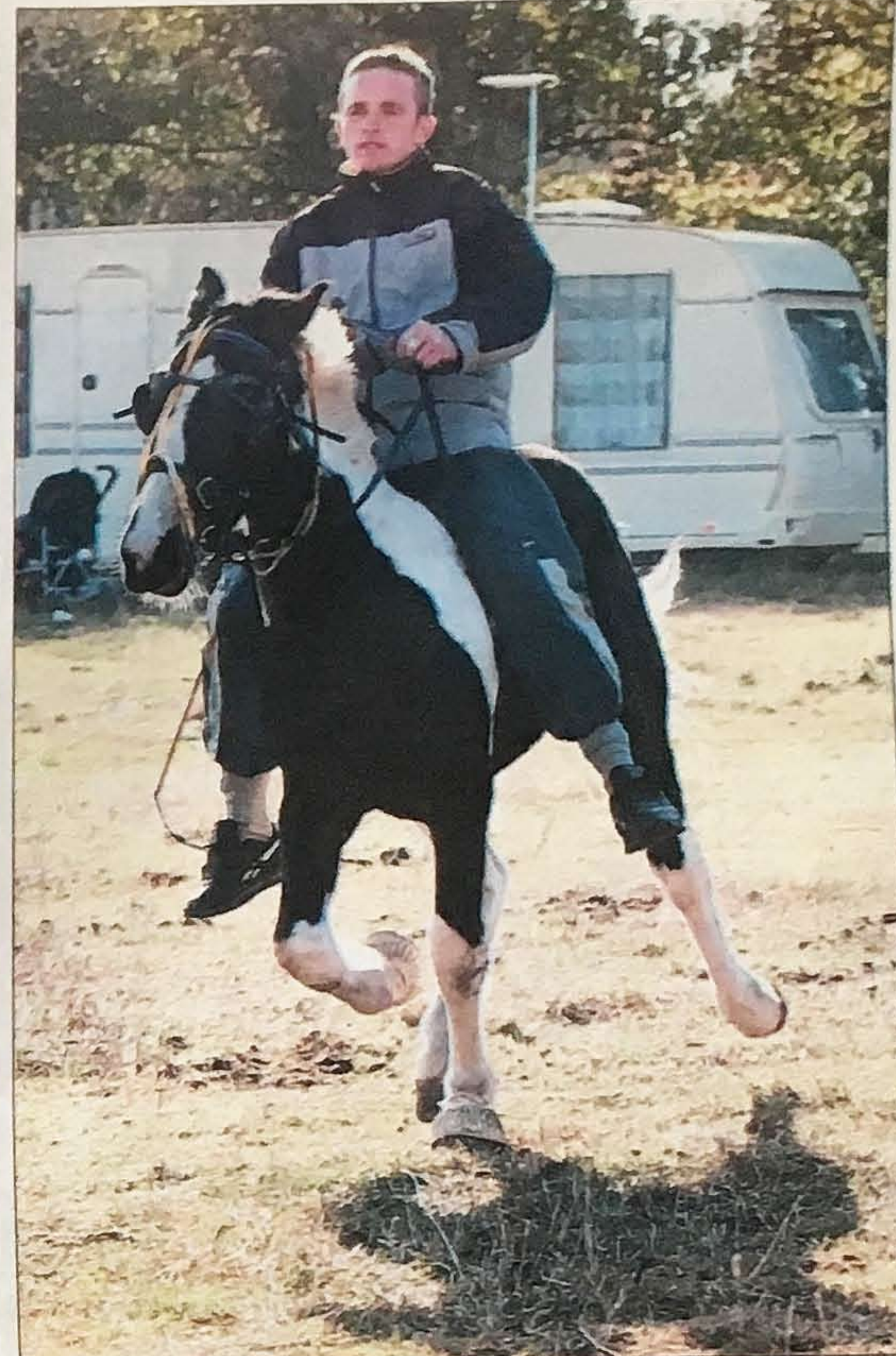




■ GIPSY CHARM: April Freshwater (left) and Ruth Miller at the horse fair in Stow-on-the-Wold



■ HORSE SKILLS: a rider shows off his horsemanship



■ CROWDED: visitors flock to the fair

When traditions collide

IT'S like a scene from a period drama. Gypsy caravans on the roadside. Old women stirring a cauldron on an open fire. Men riding bareback. Could this be the Cotswolds?

It is. Twice a year. For more than 100 years. But the ancient gypsy fair is a tradition which some traditionalists in Stow-on-the-Wold would prefer to end. Far from welcoming the cavalcade of caravans and pony traders, they shut up shop and stay at home.

For what would 21st century Cotswold man and woman want with the extraordinary range of frilly cushion covers and plastic bathtubs which the gypsy fraternity seem to love?

Not for the gypsies the antique shops, wine bars and delicatessen. Just the stuff of horse trading and caravan paraphernalia.

The event which took place last May prompted a public meeting at which shopkeepers spoke out against petty theft, intimidation and aggression from gangs of youths. Most of the shopkeepers closed on fair day this week. The sign on their doors said stocktaking or refurbishment was the reason. Some employed staff to stand guard at their front door.

Outfitter Peter Shelley said: "It's wrong that the town should batten down its hatches twice a year. Some traders have been shut for three days."

■ By CAROLINE FISHER

"There are still a lot of tourists about. What do they think if the town is shut?"

"There certainly is a problem with gangs of youths intimidating shop staff - we shouldn't be having that sort of behaviour."

"It's the younger travellers which people need to guard against. It's really up to the senior gypsies to sort this out."

Antique dealer Anthony Preston felt the event had outgrown Stow.

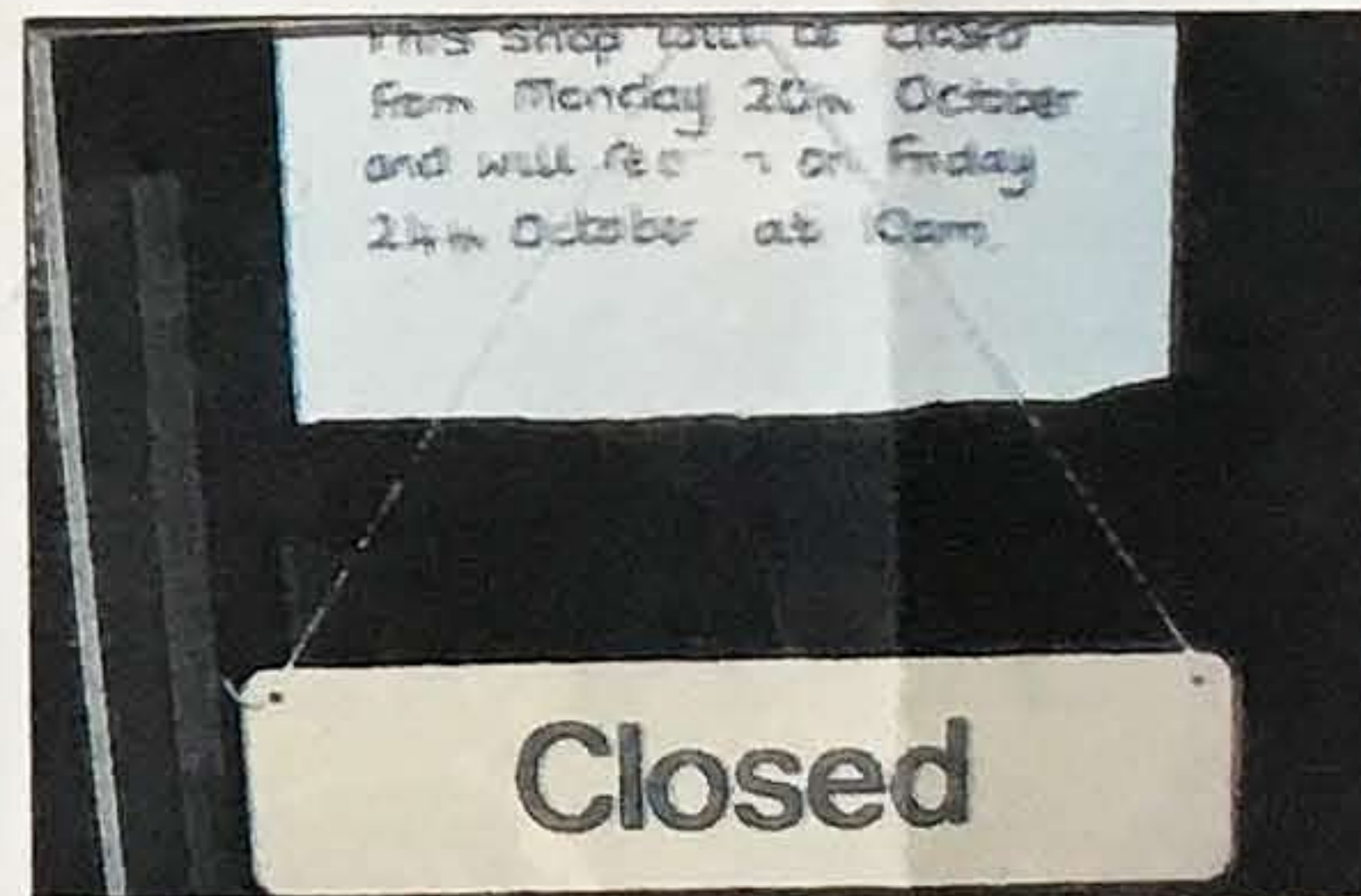
He said: "The tradition of the fair is laudable, but it's got nothing to do with Stow and has become an anomaly."

"It should go to a purpose-built place, such as a compound or Moreton Showground, where it's easier to control."

"Lots of kids run around looking for things to pilfer and a lot of food shops have suffered."

A tea shop manager, who didn't wish to be named, said: "The gypsies are a law unto themselves. It doesn't matter how many police are around. They go into The Square, drink lager and chuck cans around."

Being described as a pilfering, lager lout couldn't be further from the truth for gypsy David Rawlings as he did a deal over a canary cage.



For him, the Stow gathering is a celebration of a disappearing way of life. And in 33 years he's got used to the frosty welcome.

"If this was a non-gypsy festival you'd still get people causing trouble, but they wouldn't blame it on a race of people," he said.

"We're looked upon as the lowest of the low. But for every bad gypsy you get 20 good. We have a Christian meeting here and hundreds of travellers have given their life to the Lord and don't like what's going on."

"Yet it's important to be in Stow because of our Charter. It's keeping the old traditions alive."

Chicken seller John Bowdler, from Derby, said: "I feel very strongly we should keep it going. It's our fair."

"People talk about gangs of youths, but you get them in Birmingham or the middle of Derby where my son had his tyres slashed."

Paul Price, from Leicestershire, said he would always keep coming - along with the thousands of other visitors the fair attracts.

He added: "Traders shut up shop all over the country because of gypsy fairs, but it won't stop us. This is where it belongs."

The only local person brave enough to throw her hand in with the gypsies is former Stow Mayor and Gypsy Council vice-president Vera Norwood, who is also a shopkeeper.

"It's wrong that the town should batten down its hatches twice a year. There are still a lot of tourists about. What do they think if the town is shut?"

Shopkeeper Peter Shelley

She said: "It's racist to shut the shops and it causes ill behaviour. I have no trouble at all and treat people equally."

"Sometimes there are a few kids with attitude, but you can usually cope with it. The fair is a tradition we should be proud of. It makes Stow unique and has gone on for hundreds of years."

"It's very important for the Romany people. They've had to settle so their children can be educated but they need these fairs to show maintain their traditional way of life."



■ LIVESTOCK: John Bowdler sells chickens



■ TRADITIONAL: Edna and Les



■ PURRFECT: Matthew and Leo with a kitten



■ HORSE POWER: a buggy demonstration